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Watching the Watch: The UK Fire Service and its Impact on Sexual Minorities in the Workplace

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This empirical study in one UK Fire Service explores the experiences of sexual minorities in the workplace, an under-researched area of diversity, but one that has a growing focus of interest. The article aims to show that the organizational culture has an impact on sexual minorities in a number of different ways. The UK Fire Service is an organization which is fragmented into regional brigades, fire stations and watches (shifts) and it is at the level of the Watch that firefighters interact very closely. This article shows the complexities and dynamics of sexual minorities living and working in the Watch culture in the Fire Service. In particular, it highlights the different dimensions of the Fire Service culture which have an impact on sexual minorities. These are: the work environment, discourse, ways of working, rules, association, signs and symbols.

Keywords: sexuality, gay/lesbian, diversity, fire service, discourse

Introduction

Despite a large body of literature on individual careers and the work organization in lesbian, gay and queer studies (Badgett, 1995; Badgett and King, 1997; Burrell and Hearn, 1989; Day and Schoenrade, 1997, 2000; Driscoll *et al*., 1996; Escoffier, 1975; Gutek, 1989; Hall, 1989; Humphrey, 1999; Klawitter, 1998; Shallenberger, 1994; Woods and Lucas, 1993), there have been until recently remarkably few case studies of sexual minorities in specific work organizations. The study reported here explores the experiences of sexual minorities living and working in the Watch culture in the Fire Service. It highlights the specific cultural dimensions which are particularly pertinent in framing this experience, namely, the work environment, discourse, ways of working, rules, association and signs and symbols.

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The study uses an unusual research device, a double narrative approach, taking individual stories and experiences from sexual minorities to focus groups for discussion in the organizations. The discourse reported in the stories, the stories themselves and the discourse about the stories in the focus groups iterate the process of experiencing an individual's sexuality. Through this process and the discussion of the stories, the ways in which the cultural dimensions have an impact on the individual are explored. The following section begins by bringing together the literature on the experience of sexual minorities in organizations and highlights key themes which relate to the work environment and which then are explored in the context of the ensuing case study.

Sexual orientation in the workplace

Although there has not been a great deal of literature on sexual minorities in specific organizations, the experience of gay men and women in the workplace in general has received increasing attention. It can be seen from Table 1, a summary of peer-reviewed journals and relevant books over a 25-year period (1979–2003 inclusive), that researching the homosexual and revealing homosexual experience in the workplace has previously been the most popular area of study. However, out of six articles published between 2000 and 2003 (the exception being Ragins and Cornwell 2001, see Table 1) five have the organization as a focus, including articles by Wilson, Bruni and Gherardi and Bowen and Blackmon, which focus on the processes in organizations that have an impact on sexual minorities. This suggests that there is an increasing focus on the organization and its impact on the individual, rather than the individual *per se*. This finding is also consistent with the documented development of lesbian and gay studies from narratives of the self and the 'uncovering' of hidden lesbian and gay people to the constructionist and discursive approach of queer theory and its preliminary inroads into organization studies (Gamson, 2000, pp. 351–7; Parker, 2001, 2002).

This review of the literature shows that it contains some clear themes. There are the aspects of exploring individual minority sexual identity at work, but the impact of the organization can be theorized in terms of six further dimensions; the work environment, discourse, ways of working, rules, association and signs and symbols. This is summarized in Figure 1. The literature review is organized along these themes. Later in this article the discussion of the findings demonstrates how these dimensions are played out in the Fire Service. For conceptual clarity and coherence we have separated out the themes for discussion of both the literature and the data. However, in reality they interact with and reinforce each other. For example, the work environment and ways of working may create physical proximity and the

Table 1: The focus of the literature 1979–2003 — sexual minorities in the workplace

	Focus on discrimination	Focus on the individual	Focus on the organization
2000 to present			Spirals of silence (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003) Diversity in Blue (Miller *et al*., 2003) En-gendering differences, transgressing the boundaries, coping with the dual presence (Bruni and Gherardi, 2002)
		Walking the line: fear and disclosure of sexual orientation in the workplace (Ragins and Cornwell, 2001)	
	The relationship among reported disclosure of sexual orientation, anti-discrimination policies, top management support and work attitudes of gay and lesbian employees (Day and Schoenrade, 2000)		
			Inclusion, exclusion and ambiguity: the role of organizational culture (Wilson, 2000)
1990 to 1999		Organizing sexualities, organized inequalities (Humphrey, 1999)	
		Recognising the gay constituency in UK trade unions (Colgan, 1999b)	
		The comfort of identity (Holliday, 1999)	
		Staying in the closet versus coming out (Day and Schoenrade, 1997)	
			Sexuality, class and conflict in a lesbian workplace (Weston and Rofel, 1997)
		Research on the work experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual people (Croteau, 1996)	
		Lesbian identity and disclosure in the workplace (Driscoll *et al*., 1996)	

Table 1: continued

	Focus on discrimination	Focus on the individual	Focus on the organization
		Impact of identity development upon career trajectory: listening to the voices of lesbian women (Boatwright *et al.*, 1996)	
	The wage effects of sexual orientation discrimination (Badgett, 1995) *Discrimination against gay men and lesbians* (Snape *et al.*, 1995)		
		Professional and openly gay (Shallenberger, 1994) The career interests and aspirations of gay men: how sex-role orientation is related (Chung and Harman, 1994)	
			Coming out of the Blue (Burke, 1993)
		The Corporate Closet: the Lives of Professional Gay Men in America (Woods and Lucas, 1993) Private experiences in the public domain: lesbians in organizations (Hall, 1989)	
1980s	Discrimination against lesbians in the workforce (Levine and Leonard, 1984)		
1979	Employment discrimination against gay men (Levine, 1979)		

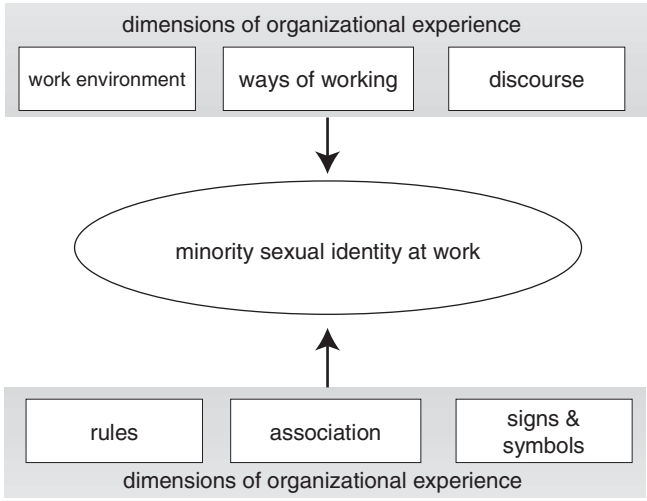

Figure 1: Dimensions of organizational experience and their impact on individual minority sexual identity

time to engage in certain forms of discourse and banter, as was found in the case study.

Aspects of individual minority sexual identity at work

Woods and Lucas (1993) assert that the 'closet' is a major metaphor for lesbian and gay people in the workplace. It is possible for someone's sexuality to remain hidden, or for lesbian, gay or bisexual people to stay 'in the closet', which distinguishes sexual orientation from most other diversity categories, such as race or gender. Being in the closet and not feeling able to tell anybody at work about one's sexual orientation can put constant pressure on an individual and have a negative effect on them and their work (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003; Ward, 2003, p. 62).

There are two main ways in which lesbians and gay men manage their undisclosed minority sexual identity in the workplace (Croteau, 1996). One is described as 'passing', where the individual, faced with potential discrimination, lies in order to be seen as heterosexual (Goffman, 1963, pp. 92–113; Woods and Lucas, 1993; Bowen and Blackmon, 2003). Such individuals are seen as homosexual by one group of people, for example, other homosexuals, but not by other groups, for example their work colleagues (Goffman, 1963, p. 93) and this is facilitated through 'institutional heterosexuality' (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003, p. 1403). Examples of passing in the literature include lesbians taking male partners to office functions and separate housewarming parties for heterosexual colleagues and lesbian friends (Hall, 1989,

p. 133). Another way that sexual minorities manage their undisclosed identity is through 'covering', where people do not disclose information, rather than actively lying. In fact, people who 'cover' may be ready to disclose their minority sexuality, but refrain from doing so only to keep it from looming large in everyday interaction, to reduce tension and to make it easier for themselves (Goffman, 1963, p. 125).

The decision to come out is one of the most important career decisions faced by gay employees and one that many others do not have to make (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003, p. 1401; Clair *et al*., 2002; Lucas and Kaplan, 1994; Ragins and Cornwell, 2001, p. 1; Ward and Winstanley, 2005). But given the potential risk in coming out and the discrimination that many face at work when they do, why do people come out at work at all? Humphrey suggests that there are three reasons. Firstly, it is an issue of honesty and integrity; secondly, it is felt that there are significant benefits in building open relationships and finally, there are those who believe that it is important to educate their colleagues about sexual minorities (Clair *et al*., 2002, p. 1402; Humphrey, 1999, p. 138). The decision is not always taken freely by individuals and while some people will give careful thought to coming out, others will have the situation thrust upon them. Hall's study gives examples of women revealing their lesbianism through their physical appearance (Hall, 1989, p. 131). A lesbian who wore jeans to a clerical job said, 'The way I dress I was, in a way, forcing it down their throats'. Another woman said 'At the time they started suspecting, I made a mistake and cut my hair short. That was the tip-off' (Hall, 1989, pp. 131–2).

Some try to take a minimal approach, dropping hints or allowing others to stumble across evidence such as photographs of partners. In the piece of research by Boatwright *et al*., where ten gay women in a variety of occupations are interviewed, the respondents suggested that coming out was an important experience. One of them said that she had 'captured something' that had previously been 'denied'. The coming-out process was also described as a second adolescence, but because they were older, they had better coping strategies (Boatwright *et al*., 1996). Gay men often speak of coming out as the final frontier; as if it were the final destination on a long, arduous journey (Woods and Lucas, 1993, p. 172). Much of the literature focuses on the 'gay man' or 'lesbian', irrespective of where they work. As previously noted, a growing number of articles considers the organizational context. The remainder of this section considers the different dimensions of organizational culture which have been identified as having an impact on sexual minorities. Our own research has suggested that individuals go through a three-stage coming-out process, which is shown in Figure 2. It is reiterative, because silence can be the silence of undisclosed identity as well as the potential silencing of gay issues in the workplace. Disclosure is the key stage in the coming-out process and difference is the state of minority identity which has to be managed after coming out.

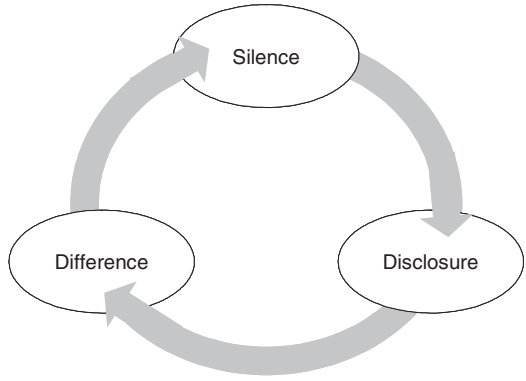

Figure 2: The process of coming out

The work environment

Not all workplaces have a majority of heterosexual workers. Research has been conducted in small organizations where sexual minorities were in the majority; for example in a study of conflict and trust in an organization called Amazon, a lesbian car-repair workshop based in the US (Weston and Rofel, 1997). The researchers interviewed eight out of the ten women who worked there, including the two owners. The strike was about a number of issues, but largely about pay and conditions. The major difference between being 'out' at Amazon and coming out in a straight organization was, as one mechanic put it, '(You) didn't have to talk about being dykes. It was pretty obvious!' (Weston and Rofel, 1997, p. 28).

The research found that a principal effect of allowing employees to be themselves in the workplace was to integrate emotions into workplace dynamics (Weston and Rofel, 1997, p. 28) and to enable a common lesbian identity to develop and overcome other differences (Weston and Rofel, 1997, p. 29). More recently, in Bruni and Gherardi's ethnographic case study of a gay newspaper in Italy, the researcher was a straight man who also experienced issues to do with coming out and covering his sexuality when asked whether he had a boyfriend or whether he was single. He replied truthfully that he was single, although he later came out to his client as 'straight' (Bruni and Gherardi, 2002).

Nevertheless, most gay people are likely to find themselves to be in a minority at work and will find that there is an inherent contradiction in being gay in a mostly heterosexual workplace. While out gay employees are more committed to their organization and are likely to feel more fulfilled and do a better job (Day and Schoenrade, 1997, 2000), there is significant, well-documented discrimination against sexual minorities in organizations

(Bowen and Blackmon, 2003; Croteau, 1996; Levine, 1979; Levine and Leonard, 1984; Welch, 1996; Woods and Lucas, 1993). For sexual minorities, discrimination and the fear of discrimination, are pervasive features of the workplace and regular features of lesbian and gay men's experience (Croteau, 1996; Gabriel *et al*., 2000, p. 174).

Discrimination in the workplace can be formal and informal, overt or covert (Croteau, 1996). It can include verbal harassment, property violence and loss of credibility or acceptance (Zuckerman and Simons, 1996, p. 40) as well as decisions not to promote (Badgett and King, 1997, p. 75), to fire or not to hire, (Snape *et al*., 1995), or to pay someone less on the basis of their sexual orientation (Badgett, 1995). Management of this stigma and fear means that people are either forced to remain closeted (Boatwright *et al*., 1996), or they tend to separate their lives between their work and their leisure (Boatwright *et al*., 1996; Croteau, 1996).

Ways of working

One of the reasons for the relative lack of research in this area is that it has not always been easy for researchers to select specific organizations and study the dynamics of minority sexuality in them. Three studies, however, are an exception, having focused on single organizations: the British police (Burke, 1993, 1994), UNISON, a trades union in the UK (Colgan, 1999a, 1999b) and a study of lesbian and gay police officers in a mid-western police department in the US (Miller *et al*., 2003). The study of the experiences of lesbian and gay police officers in the UK by Burke reported their experiences largely in their own words. Colgan's (1999a, 1999b) studies drew on interviews with 25 lesbian and gay union members in order to illustrate the value of developing lesbian and gay networks. Miller *et al*. (2003) took an interesting approach, recognizing that the police is an occupation which is gendered and sexualized. Their research involved sending anonymous questionnaires to 17 police officers and looking at the ways in which heterosexual masculinity informed practices and social interactions in policing (Miller *et al*., 2003, p. 355). Previous studies have shown that it is when individuals regularly engage in interaction, such as the police or Fire Service, groups become cohesive and subcultures form easily (Hatch, 1997). In one study, a heterosexual female social work assistant would not work with her lesbian manager because of group pressure from other colleagues (Humphrey, 1999, p. 141).

Discourse and language

Discourse embraces a range of discursive practices including language, social practice and symbolic media. In this particular section we are focusing on language and the linguistic manifestation of discursive practices, for

example, humour. The language people use at work about sexual minorities is an important part of their workplace experience. One case study (Wilson, 2000), researched the area of inclusion and exclusion in three different organizations and looked at the treatment of diversity in the framework of organizational culture. The organizations included a multinational engineering firm, a professional services firm and a media organization. The original aim of the research was to explore how men and women progressed in these organizations, but this inevitably led to a consideration of how other groups, including homosexuals, fared.

In one of the companies, the professional services organization, it was reported that 'one would have to be very discrete if one were gay' (Wilson, 2000, p. 288), while in the media organization it was suggested that it was 'OK to be gay' (Wilson, 2000, p. 293). And yet, as Wilson reported, the language used was telling: despite the organization being relatively accepting of gay men, it was reported that in a group discussion, heterosexual men still felt able to make comments such as, 'enough of them about', 'nearly overrun' or the converse, 'not here — we got rid of them all' (Wilson, 2000, p. 293). Homophobic remarks are generally commonplace in the workplace and it may be no more than a joke, comment or anecdote that sets the tone. In a survey of lesbian and gay journalists reported by Woods and Lucas, 81 per cent had heard derogatory comments about gays or lesbians in general, or about a specific employee (Woods and Lucas, 1993, p. 16). Sexuality is often linked to the person's ability to do the job. For example, one trader on Wall Street said of a colleague that it was bizarre 'that the guy's a fucking faggot and he's still trading' (Woods and Lucas, 1993, p. 17). However, it is not possible to mention language without mentioning the fact that while they are vilified, sexual minorities are paradoxically also largely ignored (Woods and Lucas, 1993, p. 5).

Rules

The literature has suggested that to achieve greater commitment from its sexual minority employees, an organization should have the right policies and procedures in place (Day and Schoenrade, 1997, 2000). The likelihood of this happening has increased in the UK with the recent introduction of the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations in 2003; including sexual orientation in policies and procedures has not previously been a legal requirement. Yet official rules are only part of the story, as has been shown in other areas of diversity management (Cockburn, 1989; Dickens, 1997). So what is the impact on the experience of the sexual minority individual where there is no procedure in place? How does this illustrate the tension between the formal and informal ways of working in the organization? The findings discussed in this article aim to answer these questions by demonstrating that where policies and procedures are unclear, informal rules take their place.

Association

Association is to do with the extent to which people from sexual minorities interact with others, either formally, through rites and rituals such as induction, or informally through processes of socialization and socializing. This relates to whether their association is restricted or not (for example if people are excluded from activities) and also relates to the nature of these interactions. Like members of other non-dominant groups, sexual minorities cannot always predict whether they will be accepted and may find it difficult to predict the reactions of other people (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003; Mintz and Rothblum, 1997).

The ultimate exclusion for an employee is to be excluded altogether, and there have been numerous instances of lesbian and gay people losing their jobs. In Humphrey's study of the 23 lesbians and gay men interviewed, three had been discharged from the military on the grounds of homosexuality, three had been outed in the national tabloids, which had resulted in their retirement from work, one lesbian had voluntarily transferred due to homophobia in the workplace, one gay man had been dismissed due to fears about AIDS and others suspected they had not been offered jobs in the first place (Humphrey, 1999, p. 136). However, inclusion and exclusion is often much more subtle. Being identified as an outsider may lead to social isolation and hostility (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003, p. 1402). In this research project, one lesbian in the Fire Service was included in the Watch banter when her male colleagues placed bets on who would be able to sleep with her first, while affection was informally withdrawn from a gay colleague who was also excluded from eating with the group.

Signs and symbols

In Wilson's (2000) study, the importance of analysing symbols in organizations was highlighted. She showed that one of the characteristics of the media organization which differentiated it was that sexuality was a significant symbol in the organization. As a media organization, there was a stereotypical expectation that gay men would form a significant part of the employee base. In addition, sex was a symbol, because 'sex sells', according to the MD (Wilson, 2000, p. 294) and there were advertising posters around the office featuring scantily clad models. The MD's nickname was 'Nanny Whip', a jokey reference suggesting deviant sexual behaviour, and talk of sex in the office was not brushed under the carpet. In addition, managers reported that physical attractiveness was a mechanism for inclusion, whether male or female. In this case, talking about sexuality and acknowledging the existence of sexual minorities created a more positive environment for them. It would be interesting to investigate this issue in an organization where sex is discussed easily, but not addressed in such a positive way. A major symbol in some

organizations and occupations, which can have an impact on sexual minorities, is the use of uniform. It can alleviate some of the problems of deciding what to wear and can potentially reduce an employee's visible difference, as one lesbian nurse explains:

> I was in a dress with a little cap perched on my head. It wasn't until I left the Health Service for another job that I realized I did not know how to dress'. (Holliday, 1999, p. 477)

The study by Miller *et al*. (2003) of a mid-western police department in the US suggested that police culture typically embraces symbols of aggressive masculinity, such as physical strength and toughness, while also adopting behaviour intended to reinforce their heterosexuality, such as dominating behaviour towards women and ridiculing and harassing gay people (Miller *et al*., 2003, p. 365).

The research context

The Fire Service as the context for the case study was chosen for two main reasons. Firstly, the Fire Service has core referential values of hegemonic masculinity. It is also a place where culture has been considered in a rather dichotomous way: heterosexual men have been used to working with other heterosexual men and, as such, they come to believe that they are working in a sexually neutral world, rather than a world where heterosexual men dominate (Martin, 1992). Sexual minorities are not perceived to be present and therefore sexual orientation is not perceived as relevant — as if gay people have a sexual orientation, but straight people do not. The *Thematic Review* of the UK Fire Service in 1999 described sexuality as an 'absolute taboo' (HM Fire Service Inspectorate, 1999, p. 26), while previous researchers have indicated that sexual minorities are seen as isolated exceptions, their sexuality being a private and individual, even a personal problem (Burrell and Hearn, 1989, p. 23; Woods and Lucas, 1993).

Secondly, the Fire Service is a context where individuals have the opportunity to interact intensely in two ways. Firefighters draw on high levels of interdependence and trust when they are fighting fires and when not fighting fires there are many opportunities for informal interaction and discourse to take place. These two contexts were thought likely to produce rich data as issues of sexuality are more likely to arise and become visible here, unlike in occupations where interaction is less intense. Thus, it was viewed as a challenging work environment for someone who is gay. Of course, there are other occupations where strong working cultures and high levels of interaction are present. The police service, for example, was the site for another case study in the same research project, but this has also been explored by other writers (Burke, 1993, 1994; Miller *et al*., 2003).

Paramedics have also been the subject of a major storytelling research project (Tangherlini, 1998).

The organization

The Shire Fire Service is a medium-sized organization with 850 employees and a total of 24 fire stations. Although in a semi-rural location, it has dense areas of industry and therefore a high level of operational risk. In addition to operational firefighters, the Service is made up of control staff and support staff. Whole-time firefighters are full-time employees of the Fire Service and are based at a nominated fire station. When a firefighter joins a station, they also join a Watch, which is the group of people who work the same shift together. The Watches are referred to by colour: red, blue, green and white. Most fire stations are equipped with dormitories to allow firefighters to rest during night shifts. Retained firefighters are part-time and are usually based in rural areas, where the fire risk is low. Typically, they have a full-time job outside the Fire Service and live and work in the local community.

The research method: narratives of sexuality in the Fire Service

Storytelling is a relatively recent addition to organizational research, but one which is growing (Boje, 1991a, b; 1995, 2001; Boyce, 1996; Czarniawska, 1998, 1999, 2004; Gabriel, 1991, 1998, 2000, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; Galpin and Sims, 1999; Plummer, 1995; Sims, 1999, 2003, 2004; Ward and Winstanley, 2004). People are storytelling animals (McAdam, 1997) and narrative is widely recognized as a powerful way to access perceptions and experience as well as to communicate the character and culture of an organization. Mumby argues that the large body of research on this approach 'recognizes narrative as a constitutive feature of organization members' sensemaking processes' (Mumby, 2004, p. 242). Mumby sees storytelling as a powerful vehicle for 'obscuring deeply structured power relations which lie beneath the taken-for-grantedness of everyday discourse' (Mumby, 2004, p. 243), thus suppressing marginal voices. We would argue that stories can also be used to access and reveal important dimensions of organizational culture. Stories are also more permissive in their content, enabling things to be said that could be self-censored through other methods. The requirement for evidence is less rigorous, and this can be an advantage as well as disadvantage for research. More things can be said, including comments that may be suppressed elsewhere, but which may be particular, purposeful and contested. Research on other occupations have highlighted the value of using

storytelling to explore experience: for example Tangherlini (1998) uses storytelling to explore the experience of paramedics, as mentioned above.

This research uses a double-level narrative approach in order to resolve the tension between the individual and organizational level of analysis and to access what can be very private experiences of sexuality in organizations. Firstly, individual experiences from sexual minorities in the form of nine stories from seven individual interviews were collected. These stories were then used in seven focus groups with five different Watches, with two focus groups at headquarters. The Watches were selected by the Equality and Diversity manager as representative of individuals who were co-operative and also others who were militant and unco-operative with respect to management. All the members of the Watches chosen were required to attend and there were no volunteers. The aim was to get firefighters talking about issues relating to sexual minorities and how they, as members of the organization, reacted to the stories told by their colleagues. Did they recognize the stories? How did they feel about the issues raised? Did they recognize the issues as valid? Most importantly, these focus groups encouraged people to talk about a topic which generally remains unspoken — sexuality.

The data were collected by one of the authors, himself a gay man. The individual respondents in the interviews knew of his sexuality and this was found to be beneficial to the research in two ways. Firstly, his sexuality helped with access to the respondents; access which was provided via the Fire Brigade Union and then through the Lesbian and Gay Network. Secondly, it is likely that the respondents opened up more to a gay man, who may be seen to be more likely to empathize with their perspective. The reflexive nature of sexual orientation and its impact on the respondents, the research and the researcher, is discussed elsewhere (Ward and Winstanley, forthcoming), but it is worth noting here that researching sexuality does have an impact on the researcher.

The focus group members did not initially know the researcher's sexuality. Each focus group was held in their workplace at these locations. The researcher was introduced by the Equality and Diversity manager as a researcher and he asked for all questions of him to be raised at the end of each session, where sometimes his sexuality was brought up as a question. Of course, it is likely that his sexuality had an impact on what was said at the focus groups, as members were likely to guess his orientation from the research and may have tempered their behaviour and talk in the light of such suppositions.

The data, both in terms of the stories and the focus group data, were analysed using NVivo, which is a software package for analysing qualitative data. The aim of this analysis was to build up themes from the initial themes taken from the literature. The indexing capability of NVivo was used to build up a more developed web of themes using a grounded approach.

Findings: dimensions of the organization which affect the workplace experience of sexual minorities

This section demonstrates the relevance of the themes from the literature (identified in Figure 1) on the experience of sexual minorities in the workplace to the empirical study and describes how these were presented. The research process was an iterative one, examining and re-examining the literature and the data in the light of each other.

Work environment

There are a number of occupations where the work environment places people in close physical proximity, where individuals may spend time hanging around in inactivity and where working conditions can be dangerous, for example in the police (Burke, 1993, 1994; Miller *et al.*, 2003) and with paramedics (Tangherlini, 1998). The study shows that these features do impact on the way people interact and experience their sexuality and its impact on others.

A lot of the firefighters' time is spent 'hanging around' waiting for an incident to happen, and so some basic facilities are provided to help them pass the time, such as the pool table and the brew table where they sit and drink tea, as well as television and video. As a result, fire stations do not look or feel like a place of work, though they are very basic. Shire Fire Service has been proactive in ensuring that separate toilet facilities were provided for women on all stations, but the fact that the changing and showering facilities are very basic and often open and communal for the same gender can affect the visibility of gay employees:

> While I was at the training centre, I didn't want to tell anybody. I'd only known everyone about 10 weeks. I've got enough grief here just trying to get through. Also the male showers were a bit antiquated, just one big tiled wall, with shower heads coming out, so it was very open and exposed. And the changing room was just one big room with benches around. I didn't really need the added grief of people all walking out of the shower because I was in there.

People choose to remain in the closet and keep their sexual identity hidden from view for a variety of reasons, including the fear of harassment, bullying and physical violence (Ward and Winstanley, 2003). This firefighter decided not to reveal his sexuality because of his fear of what might happen in the communal showers if his colleagues were to find out that he was gay. The type of work means that there is a regular need for taking a shower, so it would not be possible to avoid taking a shower altogether, leaving the only solution as avoiding coming out. In most stations the rest areas are tucked away from view, although in some they are visible to the casual visitor. They

are equipped like dormitories with beds made up with sheets and blankets. This is an area which also potentially reinforces the exclusion of sexual minorities. The question that this discussion raises is — what does it matter? What are the implications? Is it just about personal dignity, or does it have further implications for the effectiveness of the Fire Service. Some respondents thought that there were further implications and the following quotation describes how these facilities might be a barrier to men and women joining the Service:

> It's things about propriety and personal dignity that are barriers to men, women and any sexuality joining the services like the Fire Service, because they know they are going to be put in an uncomfortable position. They are not going to like it and they are not going to join. It is only those people who don't care who are going to join anyway, irrespective of their gender or sexuality.

The work environment also creates situations in which heterosexuals can show how uncomfortable they feel around homosexuals, with the following comment confirming the above firefighter's fears, 'You'd be worried about showering with him, because he'd be watching your arse. You'd feel a bit uncomfortable with it.'

The next comment suggests that the issue is not so much about straight men feeling that they are under the gaze of gay men, but it is about temptation and mutual attraction. Because there are separate showering facilities for men and women and one of the reasons for this is to prevent mutual attraction, one respondent thought the same principle should be applied to mutual attraction between men:

> You have separate showers for males and females because there's a potential for physical relationship, so shouldn't there be similar arrangements for lesbians and gay men? It's a potential environment for mutual attraction.

Firefighters themselves recognized that the specific working environment of the Fire Service not only changed their behaviour, but made it more difficult for them:

> It's more difficult for us in the Fire Service, because you are in a very closed environment — you're sleeping together in the same environment, shower, wash, cook and eat. In most working environments you sit at your desk and then you go.

Discourse and language

As a vehicle for power, discourse can mean the domination of one group by another in an oppositional relationship (Fairclough, 1989, p. 91) where the

dominated discourse is under pressure to be silenced, suppressed and eliminated. In our research we found that the use of language, especially expressed as humour, was at times aimed at suppressing the minority. Humour has been theorized in terms of resistance (Collinson, 2002), but also in subtly undermining others. Banter and joke-telling is an essential part of Fire Service life: relieving tension in this way serves many purposes, including that of reducing the stressful aspect of a job in which individuals have to see unpleasant things. Two reasons for humour are specifically referred to by firefighters themselves. Firstly, there is the idea that in dangerous situations firefighters have to rely on each other and, before entering a life-threatening situation with a colleague, it is important to 'test' them. The other reason is to relieve the boredom of a job that involves a lot of hanging around:

> You do rely on each other and you do test each other's mettle and if you do detect a weakness, you might be concerned with that person forming part of the team. I think the banter is an important part of testing the other people's mettle.

This functional approach to humour in organizations has been criticized by researchers, however, precisely because it fails to explain the power asymmetries and inequalities in organizations (Collinson, 2002, p. 271). Sometimes the banter can backfire:

> Over the Christmas table we were going to give each other presents and he'd got a present lined up — a copy of *The Pink Paper* and *Boyz* all wrapped up. He wanted to see my face when I opened it, but he'd done this before he knew I was gay. And then in the meantime I came out. He was more upset about that than anything else.

Many of the firefighters who took part in the focus groups were at pains to point out that sexuality and gay people in particular were not an issue, but acknowledgement of sexual minorities comes with strings attached (Fairclough, 1989). Having gay people around was OK, so long as they did not talk about it. These views effectively suppress the discursive practices of the sexual minorities in the organization. Consider the following:

> Ninety-five per cent of people in this job don't have a problem with anything . . . as long as it's not flaunted in front of them, literally flaunted in front of them . . . I could take you to quite a few people that you wouldn't know about their sexuality until they actually told you.

This respondent was suggesting that he accepted lesbian and gay colleagues as long as they kept their alternative sexuality secret. This clearly implies that to fit into the group, they are not allowed to talk about their partners, friends and family, nor what they do at the weekend, if it implies their sexuality. It is also interesting that this respondent equates those people who are upfront about their sexual orientation with those who claim to be victimized at work.

Rules

The research suggests that there is a lack of clarity over policies for dealing with sexual minorities and that it is what happens in practice in key procedural areas, such as recruitment and promotion, that counts. Unlike gender, race or disability, sexual minorities did not enjoy legal protection at the time of the research. Although most brigades, including the Shire Fire Service, included the issue of sexuality in their policies, there was generally a lack of up-to-date, inclusive and consistent policies (HM Fire Service Inspectorate, 1999, p. 16). The handling of the key events reported here seems to be fraught with confusion about what approach should be adopted. This confusion allows individuals to apply their own informal rules and increases the potential for discrimination. A gay officer in the Fire Service recounts the time he went for promotion and failed. The impact of being out and the subsequent discrimination experienced influenced him in his decision to apply successfully to another Fire Brigade, regretfully leaving his original brigade:

> I was just coming up for a promotion and I didn't get it . . . because of one of the senior officers' attitude towards me . . . I decided instead to move on and to prove to myself and to him that I was capable. . . . Subsequently, (at my new brigade) I found out that when they offered me the job, this senior officer from my old brigade found out and rang up and said, 'You do realize he's queer?'

Although the discrimination experienced encouraged him to join another brigade, he did not challenge the discrimination itself. Furthermore, it was not possible for him to go back into the closet, even at his future brigade, where the news travelled faster than he did. Another example of a blocked job move is the story from a gay firefighter who wanted to transfer to get additional training to develop and improve his job knowledge and responsibilities but could not, because the Watch to which he was to transfer did not want to work with a gay man:

> They moved the fire rescue unit (or FRU, a fire engine which carries all the heavy lifting and cutting gear) from Station 'A' up to Station 'B'. I'd put in to transfer to 'B' and do a course to drive the FRU. Nothing came of it and I was told that there weren't any vacancies. But then the person in charge of the FRU approached the training staff for some advice because . . . 'there is a gay guy who wants to transfer (here) . . . and the guys on the Watch aren't happy about it'.

Despite equality policies being in place, in this instance they had little effect. Instead of challenging the Watch for their homophobic attitudes, the officer on the Watch approached the training department for advice. These stories were presented to a focus group of firefighters in Shire Fire Service and they

described the informal rule, which is that if someone has a problem working with a gay person, then their views should be accommodated:

> The management have got a duty to keep everybody happy. If someone's got a problem with a gay person, they can go to their boss and say, 'I'm not happy with this, can I transfer to another watch?' I think the manager has a duty to try and accommodate that person.

What happens in practice, of course, is that it is the gay man or lesbian who gets moved, or in this case, gets blocked from joining the Watch, rather than the people who are unhappy with working with them. One view went so far as to suggest that when people are appointed to work at a particular station, they should be made aware if there are any out gay people there, so that the new recruit can refuse, if they do not find working with gay people acceptable:

> You have to make [it known to] people coming in that there is a gay person on the station. If someone's overtly gay, you could be putting someone in who doesn't like gays but has been put in under false pretences.

Ironically, although the idea of having a policy of warning people whether there is a gay person on the station sounds quite shocking, this suggestion would merely formalize what currently happens in some places. Focus group respondents thought it wrong to make someone feel embarrassed for holding homophobic views: 'Above all, if someone holds homophobic views and refuses to work with lesbian and gay colleagues, they should not be made to feel embarrassed about holding these views'.

Signs and symbols

Many organizations are imbued with signs and symbols; the law courts, army and police, even McDonalds and IBM. The Fire Service is no exception: it is laden with symbolic paraphernalia. The uniform symbolizes the fact that the service is semi-disciplined; the fire bell, the sirens and fire engines represent the emergency response aspect of the service; the clearly visible fire stations represent the high public profile that the service enjoys. Here we concentrate on two symbols which have an impact on minority sexual identity: the uniform and the fire bell.

Most of the debate about whether the Fire Service should wear a uniform or not has centred around the need for discipline in the service and the need for a physical expression of rank. The uniform is a symbol of the disciplined nature of the service, as well as being a symbol of its history and its links with the armed forces and, while some want to break this link, it is popular with many others. There has been little acknowledgement of the role that uniform in the Fire Service has played for sexual minorities, even though dressing is intricately linked to queer employment (Holliday, 1999, p. 477). Uniforms can

be a, positive or negative mask (Holliday, 1999, p. 477) thereby hiding sexual orientation; and certain uniforms, such as the firefighter's, are held with a certain affectionate in lesbian, gay and bisexual culture (Holliday, 1999, p. 478). Uniforms do not only hide sexual orientation; they also mask prejudiced views. In Shire Fire Service we regularly heard the view expressed: 'you can believe what you want to, but you have to behave in a certain way when you're wearing the uniform'.

The role of uniform is also important for minorities, as it gives the organization a sign of their rank and a reminder of the respect that is due to them in a semi-disciplined service; a respect which might otherwise be missing. One gay officer told us that his white shirt (a sign of officer status in his brigade) was useful in making his sexual identity of secondary concern. It also changed people's behaviour around him, for example:

> I remember going to a station a few months ago and I was aware that as soon as I arrived, someone grabbed something from the noticeboard and screwed it up and threw it in the bin.

Uniform also underscores the idea of inclusion, membership and cohesion and imposes a uniformity, which can undermines difference. It is about membership and belonging. Although this can subsume individual identities and difference, it can also be used for resistance and the affirmation of alternative identities by being taken to a different context, such as a Gay Pride march.[1] In the following quotation, one gay firefighter explained that he used the uniform and the affection that surrounds it as a positive symbol at the London lesbian and gay pride march: 'I attended the Gay Pride march in uniform, raising the profile of gay men in the Fire Service'.

There is often a difference between the way that firefighters behave on the fire-ground and the way they behave as a Watch when they are back at the station. The physical sign which separates these two areas is the fire bell. As soon as the fire bell rings, the firefighters focus on getting to the scene of the incident. Only when the incident is over and they receive the instruction to return to the station, do they return to the banter, ribbing and horseplay which is a feature of life on a Watch. Derrida's neologism, 'differance' is a useful concept to help in understanding this practice (Collins and Mayblin, 2000, p. 75); there is a binary opposition between the action outside, when the firefighters are responding to an incident or emergency and the passive waiting that takes place inside, from which it is separated in both time and space and this separation is highlighted by symbols. The following quotation from a respondent here explains this:

> There are two different areas of work — there's in here and then there's when the bells go down; that's when you really go to work. . . . And then you come back here, although you're working here you're also working together and that's when the problems start: when you're on your stand

> down period. Especially on nights, you live together, rather than work together.

The response to difference is therefore at variance in the two different 'spaces'. In the fire station, which is not necessarily viewed as a workplace *per se* by firefighters, there is a lot of 'hanging around' as firefighters wait for an incident to happen. The response to difference in this 'space' is potentially hostile and is made up of banter and horseplay. The fire bell then moves people from the casual, informal banter time to a different 'space'; where the focus is on performance, where all differences are put aside and getting the job done overrides all other considerations. The experience of being gay is different in each space. In the passive space, there are many opportunities for exclusion, which is felt particularly deeply by sexual minorities. The passive space is a time for social activities of various sorts; playing pool, basketball and, of course, eating. In the following example, a gay firefighter tells of stories he has heard of lesbians and gay men being excluded from eating together:

> I do know of cases where people have been totally and utterly excluded. From silly things like eating facilities — people would refuse to eat with individuals — they would order food from a Chinese restaurant or Indian and the gay man or lesbian wouldn't be asked to order anything.

Ways of working

When firefighters joins the Fire Service, they are posted to a fire station, where they join a Watch and where they remain until they are either promoted or leave. Apart from rare detached duties, they work continually with the same group of people. This means that strong subcultures have grown up at the level of the Watch. There are two sides to this. On the one hand, it is very much a club culture with a strong team ethos which can work well for a person whose identity is affirmed and supported. On the other hand it can sometimes be debilitating if the person becomes excluded from the group. This study shows that sexual minorities have an effect on how these subcultures interact and are viewed by others. The following account recalls how one Watch became known as the 'Pink Watch' when one of the firefighters came out, thereby increasing the visibility of minority sexual identity:

> My brigade, area-wise, is probably bigger than London and by the third day of my telling my Watch, we received a fax from another station on the other side of the brigade, asking us who the gay guy was on the shift. . . . The Watch system is made up of four Watches; red, blue white and green. We became known as the Pink Watch. We didn't have a problem with it, because, as I say, it was a very close-knit Watch.

In this respect at least, the Watch was seen as one cohesive group. They are described by the individual as a close-knit Watch and the fact that they did not have a problem with being called the Pink Watch went on to affirm and support this individual's gay identity. This story gives some insight into how the group is perceived; but the question remains — how does the Watch perceive sexual minorities and how, if at all, can this attitude be influenced? One focus group respondent suggested that the crucial influencing factor in how the watch behaves is the Watch Commander: 'The Watch attitude is so important in this — they set the tone, if the Watch Commander [is], for instance, homophobic. They take the lead on things, the Watch Commander'.

Regular periods are built into the typical day for training. What form this physical training takes differs from one Watch to another, but there is likely to be a mix of individual training, for example in the gym and group activity. These periods provide opportunities for the group to include, or to exclude, an individual, as the following anecdote describes:

> Often we would play volleyball on our stand-down period and when you won a point, you'd give someone a hug. After I came out, some people would stop that with me.

The stand-down period and physical training provide the opportunity for both inclusion, for example the hug for winning a point, and exclusion, for example, when that stopped with one member of the Watch.

Association

Sexual orientation, unlike most other areas of diversity, is invisible; in organizations where few people feel able to come out, this means that the individual may experience an intense feeling of isolation. In the Fire Service especially, discussion of sexuality is still a real taboo, coupled with the prevalent assumption that gay and lesbian firefighters just do not exist. The story from a gay firefighter who experienced this sense of isolation shows the importance of association with others:

> I think, as a gay man, the high point for me was when I'd been there for under a year and I saw the Union banner at the London Lesbian and Gay Pride march. I walked up and found out that there were other gay firefighters. I really did think I was the only gay firefighter. That was the high point (of my career); knowing that there were other gay people in the Fire Service.

This story is not an isolated one, for example: 'I always thought I was the only gay firefighter in the UK' and 'I thought I was the only gay firefighter in the world. It was a failure on my part not to get off my backside and contact other people.'

The responses from fellow Watch members to a gay firefighter coming out are many and varied: some positive and some not so. Socialization into an

organization can take various forms, including wearing the same uniform (Holliday, 1999) and socializing or joining in with banter (Woods and Lucas, 1993). One of the ways that new recruits become socialized in the Watch is by going through some kind of initiation ceremony. A lesbian firefighter described what the socialization process was like for her, which ranged from betting on who from within the Watch could sleep with her first and change her sexual orientation to betting when her period was due:

> They actually ran a book, a betting book, to see who the first guy would be who could get off with me and change me, or my orientation. I only found out about a year after it had been running and they were like, 'We've given up now!' And I was like, 'I wish you'd have told me if there was any money involved: it might just have done it. We could have shared, come on!' They also bet on when my period was due. They could never tell.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to address the scarcity of empirical work in the organizational literature on the lived experience of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transsexuals. This scarcity results from a number of factors. The historical lack of legal protection in the UK and adverse societal attitudes towards sexual minorities has meant that few people have hitherto taken the risk to come out in the workplace. This is now changing as more and more people come out. Thus, until recently much previous research in the area of sexual minorities in the workplace has been unable to study specific organizations, because it was almost impossible to access enough sexual minorities to speak to. Studies in the past have therefore tended to concentrate on individual experiences in organizations (Hall, 1989; Ragins and Cornwell, 2001; Shallenberger, 1994; Woods and Lucas 1993) and, for very good reasons, they have not been able to link this experience to any particular organization.

This article builds on the existing literature by taking themes that have been identified in the literature previously and applied them to one particular organization, the UK Fire Service. These themes or dimensions are the working environment, ways of working, discourse, rules, association and signs and symbols. For example, the showers are one example of the working environment which impacts on minority sexual identity. In the example from our research, a firefighter was unwilling to come out because of the reaction he might receive from other people in the communal showers. The closeness of the Watch is cited as an example of how the firefighters' ways of working impact on sexual minorities. Discourse and language is an important medium through which sexual minorities understand how they are considered: one example of this in the research is the way in which firefighters use joking and banter to test new recruits. Rules, both formal and informal, have

an impact on the workplace experience. Our research highlights ways in which tension can exist between the two. Policies may stipulate that all are to be treated equally, but informally the Watch is allowed to say who may join them and who may not. Association with co-workers is an important part of working life. Our research gives a positive example of the inclusion of a lesbian firefighter through banter. Finally, two examples of signs and symbols were presented from our research, the fire bell and the uniform. In both cases, these were examples of how symbols have an impact on the workplace experience of sexual minorities.

The main thrust of the model is to show the dynamics of the organization and the way that they have an impact on minority sexual identity. However, there is an implied question in this model; what are the dynamics of minority sexual identity? Figure 2 shows the principal dynamics of gay identity, which we have drawn from both the literature and our own research.

The aspect of silence represents both the closet, (for those people who have not come out at work) and the lack of recognition which minority sexuality receives in the workplace. Disclosure is an important step for sexual minorities, and coming out was generally described by the respondents in our research as one of the most important points in their career. Finally, difference and the response that that engenders results from the process of coming out. The ways that the elements of these two models interact provides a potentially rich source of insights. Using the theme of discourse as an example, discourse can exclude a gay man, maintaining the silence of an undisclosed identity. Discourse can also include individuals negatively, even if they have not come out, as gossip and rumour try to establish their sexuality. Following disclosure by individuals, however, they can be the subject of the discourse, or be included in the conversation as a participant. The discourse may articulate various individuals' response to the difference implied by gay sexuality, or a person's sexuality may be rendered invisible in the discourse, as, for example where someone remains 'in the closet' or is rendered visible through disclosure.

Another example of the potential for interplay between these two models is the theme of signs and symbols, in particular the fire bell and the uniform. Gay identity is silenced on one side of the fire bell when the Watch is responding to an incident and it is generally silenced when firefighters wear their uniform, although marching in uniform at Gay Pride is a rare opportunity for disclosing sexual identity in uniform. Difference, and responses to that difference, is particularly relevant prior to the fire bell, when the firefighters are hanging around at the station.

The themes identified also interact with each other to construct and impact on gay experience and identity. So for example, a way of working which involves close proximity, night-work and much hanging around, aligned with a working environment in which men are sleeping and showering communally, may create the climate in which certain forms of discourse and banter can occur. Likewise the use of signs and symbols, as in the wearing of

the firefighter's uniform on a gay pride march, creates banter and discussion amongst the Watch, as well as leading to association or disassociation between other members and the gay firefighters.

The study has provided a method for accessing the interaction of these elements through a two-level storytelling approach. The richness of individual stories combined with the interaction created by groups discussing these stories permits these issues to be explored in a way that could perhaps be matched only by extended participant observation in the workplace. The dry presentation of themes comes to life through the tales and perspectives of those working in the Fire Service. The embodied, lived experiences of conversation and banter, working in the close confines of a team that sleeps, eats and works together, the feelings of isolation or elation, of being a part of or separate from the team, experiencing support or hostility, seem to make more sense when explored in a single context, such as in this particular fire service. Although the themes have been separated out for individual treatment in this article, it is their interaction, and particularly the interplay between context and experience, which enables the witness or reader to develop a deeper comprehension of minority sexual identity. To move from meaning-making and the cognitive understanding of experience, to incorporate sense-making and the capacity to use a range of senses, feelings and emotions to comprehend and take in these experiences, requires a method that can convey thoughts and emotion, a framework that encompasses interaction and process and an arena or context in which these can be situated.

Note

1. A festival incorporating a march to celebrate gay identity and life takes place in London and major cities in the UK and around the world every year.

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